The Dhammapada, an anthology of verses attributed to the Buddha, has long been recognized as one of the masterpieces of early Buddhist literature. Only more recently have scholars realized that it is also one of the early masterpieces in the Indian tradition of *kavya,* or *belles lettres*.

Our translation of the Dhammapada is an attempt to render the verses into English in a way that does justice to both of the traditions to which the text belongs. Although it is tempting to view these traditions as distinct, dealing with form (*kavya*) and content (Buddhism), the ideals of *kavya* aimed at combining form and content into a seamless whole. At the same time, the early Buddhists adopted and adapted the conventions of *kavya* in a way that skillfully dovetailed with their views of how teaching and listening played a role in their path of practice. As an example of *kavya*, the *Dhammapada* has a fairly complete body of ethical and aesthetic theory behind it, for the purpose of *kavya* was to instruct in the highest ends of life while simultaneously giving delight. The ethical teaching of the *Dhammapada* is expressed in the first pair of verses: the mind, through its actions (*kamma*), is the chief architect of one's happiness and suffering both in this life and beyond. The first three chapters elaborate on this point, to show that there are two major ways of relating to this fact: as a wise person, who is heedful enough to make the necessary effort to train his/her own mind to be a skillful architect; and as a fool, who is heedless and sees no reason to train the mind.

The work as a whole elaborates on this distinction, showing in more detail both the path of the wise person and that of the fool, together with the rewards of the former and the dangers of the latter: the path of the wise person can lead not only to happiness within the cycle of death and rebirth, but also to total escape into the Deathless, beyond the cycle entirely; the path of the fool leads not only to suffering now and in the future, but also to further entrapment within the cycle. The purpose of the *Dhammapada* is to make the wise path attractive to the reader so that he/she will follow it -- for the dilemma posited by the first pair of verses is not one in the imaginary world of fiction; it is the dilemma in which the reader is already placed by the fact of being born.

To make the wise path attractive, the techniques of poetry are used to give "savor" (*rasa*) to the message. Ancient Indian aesthetic treatises devoted a great deal of discussion to the notion of savor and how it could be conveyed. The basic theory was this: Artistic composition expressed states of emotion or states of mind called *"bhava."* The standard list of basic emotions included love (delight), humor, grief, anger, energy, fear, disgust, and astonishment. The reader or listener exposed to these presentations of emotion did not participate in them directly; rather, he/she savored them as an aesthetic experience at one remove from the emotion. Thus, the savor of grief is not grief, but compassion. The savor of energy is not energy itself, but admiration for heroism. The savor of love is not love but an experience of sensitivity. The savor of astonishment is a sense of the marvelous. The proof of the indirectness of the aesthetic experience was that some of the basic emotions were decidedly unpleasant, while the savor of the emotion was to be enjoyed.

Although a work of art might depict many emotions, and thus -- like a good meal -- offer many savors for the reader/listener to taste, one savor was supposed to dominate. Writers made a common practice of announcing the savor they were trying to produce, usually stating in passing that their particular savor was the highest of all. The *Dhammapada* states explicitly that the savor of *Dhamma* is the highest savor, which indicates that that is the basic savor of the work. Classic aesthetic theory lists the savor of *Dhamma*, or justice, as one of the three basic varieties of the heroic savor (the other two deal with generosity and war): thus we would expect the majority of the verses to depict energy, and in fact they do, with their exhortations to action, strong verbs, repeated imperatives, and frequent use of the imagery from battles, races, and conquests.

Dhamma, in the Buddhist sense, implies more than the "justice" of *Dhamma* in aesthetic theory. However, the long section of the *Dhammapada* devoted to "The Judge" -- beginning with a definition of a good judge, and continuing with examples of good judgment -- shows that the Buddhist concept of *Dhamma* has room for the aesthetic meaning of the term as well. Classic theory also holds that the heroic savor should, especially at the end of a piece, shade into the marvelous. This, in fact, is what happens periodically throughout the *Dhammapada*, and especially at the end, where the verses express astonishment at the amazing and paradoxical qualities of a person who has followed the path of heedfulness to its end, becoming "pathless" -- totally indescribable, transcending conflicts and dualities of every sort. Thus the predominant emotions that the verses express in Pali -- and should also express in translation -- are energy and astonishment, so as to produce qualities of the heroic and marvelous for the reader to savor. This savor is then what inspires the reader to follow the path of wisdom, with the result that he/she will reach a direct experience of the true happiness, transcending all dualities, found at the end of the path.

Classic aesthetic theory lists a variety of rhetorical features that can produce savor. Examples from these lists that can be found in the *Dhammapada* include: accumulation (*padoccaya*), admonitions (*upadista*), ambiguity (*aksarasamghata*), benedictions (*asis*), distinctions (*visesana*), encouragement (*protsahana*), etymology (*nirukta*), examples (*drstanta*), explanations of cause and effect (*hetu*), illustrations (*udaharana*), implications (*arthapatti*), rhetorical questions (*prccha*), praise (*gunakirtana*), prohibitions (*pratisedha*), and ornamentation (*bhusana*).

Of these, ornamentation is the most complex, including four figures of speech and ten "qualities." The figures of speech are simile, extended metaphor, rhyme (including alliteration and assonance), and "lamps". This last figure is a peculiarity of Pali -- a heavily inflected language -- that allows, say, one adjective to modify two different nouns, or one verb to function in two separate sentences. (The name of the figure derives from the idea that the two nouns radiate from the one adjective, or the two sentences from the one verb.) In English, the closest we have to this is parallelism combined with ellipsis. An example from the translation is -- Mara overcomes him as the wind, a weak tree -- where "overcomes" functions as the verb in both clauses, even though it is elided from the second.

The ten "qualities" are more general attributes of sound, syntax, and sense, including such attributes as charm, clarity, delicacy, evenness, exaltation, sweetness, and strength. The ancient texts are not especially clear on what some of these terms mean in practice. Even where they are clear, the terms deal in aspects of Pali/Sanskrit syntax not always applicable to English. What is important, though, is that some qualities are seen as more suited to a particular savor than others: strength and exaltation, for example, best convey a taste of the heroic and marvelous. Of these characteristics, strength (*ojas*) is the easiest to quantify, for it is marked by long compounded words. In the *Dhammapada*, approximately one tenth of the verses contain compounds that are as long as a whole line of verse, and one verse has three of its four lines made up of such compounds. By the standards of later Sanskrit verse, this is rather mild, but when compared with verses in the rest of the Pali Canon and other early masterpieces of *kavya*, the *Dhammapada* is quite strong.

The text also explicitly adds to the theory of characteristics in saying that "sweetness" is not just an attribute of words, but of the person speaking. If the person is a true example of the virtue espoused, his/her words are sweet. This point could be generalized to cover many of the other qualities as well.

Another point from classic aesthetic theory that may be relevant to the *Dhammapada* is the principle of how a literary work is given unity. Although the text does not provide a step-by-step sequential portrait of the path of wisdom, as a lyric anthology it is much more unified than most Indian examples of that genre. The classic theory of dramatic plot construction may be playing an indirect role here. On the one hand, a plot must exhibit unity by presenting a conflict or dilemma, and depicting the attainment of a goal through overcoming that conflict. This is precisely what unifies the *Dhammapada*: it begins with the duality between heedless and heedful ways of living, and ends with the final attainment of total mastery. On the other hand, the plot must not show smooth, systematic progress; otherwise the work would turn into a treatise. There must be reversals and diversions to maintain interest. This principle is at work in the fairly unsystematic ordering of the *Dhammapada's* middle sections. Verses dealing with the beginning stages of the path are mixed together with those dealing with later stages and even stages beyond the completion of the path.

One more point is that the ideal plot should be constructed with a sub-plot in which a secondary character gains his/her goal, and in so doing helps the main character attain his or hers. In addition to the aesthetic pleasure offered by the sub-plot, the ethical lesson is one of human cooperation: people attain their goals by working together. In the *Dhammapada*, the same dynamic is at work. The main "plot" is that of the person who masters the principle of *kamma* to the point of total release from *kamma* and the round of rebirth; the "sub-plot" depicts the person who masters the principle of *kamma* to the point of gaining a good rebirth on the human or heavenly planes. The second person gains his/her goal, in part, by being generous and respectful to the first person, thus enabling the first person to practice to the point of total mastery. In return, the first person gives counsel to the second person on how to pursue his/her goal. In this way the *Dhammapada* depicts the play of life in a way that offers two potentially heroic roles for

the reader to choose from, and delineates those roles in such a way that all people can choose to be heroic, working together for the attainment of their own true well being. Appropriate reflection, the first step a listener should follow in carrying out the well-spoken word, means contemplating one's own life to see the dangers of following the path of foolishness and the need to follow the path of wisdom. The Buddhist tradition recognizes two emotions as playing a role in this reflection. The first is *samvega,* a strong sense of dismay that comes with realizing the futility and meaningless of life as it is normally lived, together with a feeling of urgency in trying to find a way out of the meaningless cycle. The second emotion is *pasada,* the clarity and serenity that come when one recognizes a teaching that presents the truth of the dilemma of existence and at the same time points the way out. One function of the verses in the *Dhammapada* is to provide this sense of clarity, which is why one verse states that the wise grow serene on hearing the *Dhamma*, and another states that the most worthwhile verse is the meaningful one that, on hearing, brings peace.

However, the process does not stop with these preliminary feelings of peace and serenity. The listener must carry through with the path of practice that the verses recommend. Although much of the impetus for doing so comes from the emotions of *samvega* and *pasada* sparked by the content of the verses, the heroic and marvelous savor of the verses plays a role as well, by inspiring the listener to rouse within him or herself the energy and strength that the path will require. When the path is brought to fruition, it brings the peace and delight of the Deathless. This is where the process initiated by hearing or reading the *Dhamma* bears its deepest savor, surpassing all others. It is the highest sense in which the meaningful verses of the *Dhammapada* bring peace.

The *Dhammapada* has for centuries been used as an introduction to the Buddhist mindset. However, the text is by no means elementary, either in terms of content or style. Many of the verses presuppose at least a passing knowledge of Buddhist doctrine; others employ multiple levels of meaning and wordplay typical of polished *kavya*. For this reason, I have added notes to the translation to help draw out some of the implications of verses that might not be obvious to people who are new to either of the two traditions that the text represents.

Historical Notes: The Text and the Translation

There are many versions of the Dhammapada now extant: several recensions of the Pali Dhammapada from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; two incomplete manuscripts of a Gandhari Dharmapada found in central Asia; and a manuscript of a Buddhist Hybrid-Sanskrit Dharmapada found in a library in Tibet, called the Patna Dharmapada because photographs of this manuscript are now kept in Patna, India. There is also a Chinese translation of the Dharmapada made in the third century C.E. from a Prakrit original, now no longer extant, similar to -- but not identical with -- the Pali Dhammapada. Parts of a Dharmapada text are included in the Mahavastu, a text belonging to the Lokottaravadin Mahasanghika school. In addition, there are Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions of a text called the Udanavarga, which is known in at least four recensions, all of them containing many verses in common with the Dhammapada/Dharmapada (Dhp) texts. To further complicate matters, there are Jain

anthologies that contain verses clearly related to some of those found in these Buddhist anthologies as well.

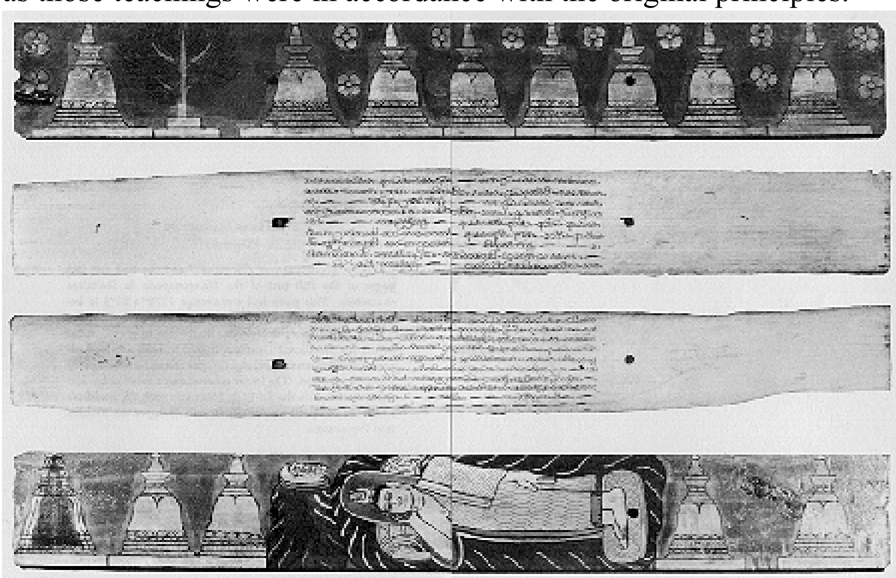
Despite the many similarities among these texts, they contain enough discrepancies to have fueled a small scholarly industry. The different recensions of the Pali Dhp contain so many variant readings that there isn't yet -- even after more than a century of Western scholarship on the topic -- a single edition covering them all. The discrepancies among the Pali and non-Pali versions are even greater. They arrange verses in different orders, each contains verses not found in the others, and among the verses in different versions that *are* related, the similarity in terms of imagery or message is sometimes fairly tenuous.

The Buddha had the foresight to ensure that this less standardized fund of memories not be discounted by later generations; at the same time, he established norms so that mistaken reports, deviating from the principles of his teachings, would not be allowed to creep into the accepted body of doctrine. To discourage fabricated reports of his words, he warned that anyone who put words in his mouth was slandering him. This, however, could in no way prevent mistaken reports based on honest misunderstandings. So, shortly before his death, he summarized the basic principles of his teachings: the 37 Wings to Awakening in the general framework of the development of virtue, concentration, and discernment, leading to release. Then he announced the general norms by which reports of his teachings were to be judged. The *Maha-parinibbana Suttanta* quotes him as saying:

"There is the case where a monk says this: 'In the Blessed One's presence have I heard this, in the Blessed One's presence have I received this... In the presence of a community with well-known leading elders... In a monastery with many learned elders who know the tradition... In the presence of a single elder who knows the tradition have I heard this, in his presence have I received this: This is the *Dhamma*, this is the *Vinaya*, this is the Teacher's instruction.' His statement is neither to be approved nor scorned. Without approval or scorn, take careful note of his words and make them stand against the discourses and tally them against the *Vinaya*. If, on making them stand against the discourses and tallying them against the *Vinaya*, you find that they don't stand with the discourses or tally with the *Vinaya*, you may conclude: 'This is not the word of the Blessed One; this monk has misunderstood it' -- and you should reject it. But if... they stand with the discourses and tally with the *Vinaya*, you may conclude: 'This is the word of the Blessed One; this monk has understood it rightly.'"

Thus, a report of the Buddha's teachings was to be judged, not on the authority of the reporter or his sources, but on the principle of consistency: did it fit in with what was already known of the doctrine? This principle was designed to ensure that nothing at odds with the original would be accepted into the standard canon, but it did open the possibility that teachings in line with the Buddha's, yet not actually spoken by him, might find their way in. The early redactors of the canon seem to have been alert to this possibility, but not overly worried by it. As the Buddha himself pointed out many times, he did not design or create the *Dhamma*. He simply found it in nature. Anyone who

developed the pitch of mental strengths and abilities needed for Awakening could discover the same principles as well. Thus the *Dhamma* was by no means exclusively his. This attitude was carried over into the passages of the *Vinaya* that cite four categories of *Dhamma* statements: spoken by the Buddha, spoken by his disciples, spoken by seers (non-Buddhist sages), spoken by heavenly beings. As long as a statement was in accordance with the basic principles, the question of who first stated it did not matter. In an oral culture, where a saying might be associated with a person because he authored it, approved it, repeated it often, or inspired it by his/her words or actions, the question of authorship was not the overriding concern it has since become in literate cultures. The recent discovery of evidence that a number of teachings associated with the Buddha may have pre- or post-dated his time would not have fazed the early Buddhists at all, as long as those teachings were in accordance with the original principles.



Outer wooden covers ("Kamba") and the first and last pages of the Pali text of the Dhammapada in Sinhalese characters. This palm leaf manuscript (17 1/2" X 2 1/2") is believed to be the oldest extant copy of the scripture.

The upper cover depicts the Bodhi tree in green, under which the mendicant Gautama is said to have attained supreme enlightenment, and eight stupas colored amber against a red background. The lower cover shows a relic casket and two stupas beside the Sri Pada Mountain with the Buddha's footprint, and portrays also the Great Passing of the Buddha into Parinirvana.

The seventh-sixth centuries B.C. marked a new historical epoch in the religious evolution of Northern India. The racial intellect of the time was compelled to face two opposing psychological trends. The solution lay in the emergence of a magnetic individual who could successfully synthesize the realism of the physical philosophers with the idealism of the ancient Vedas, one who could blend the best of the old with the vigorous and constructive elements of the new. This mighty task, undertaken by Gautama Sakyamuni, was successfully accomplished by setting the "Wheel of the Sacred Law in motion" -- that eternal Law which is forever valid, for the past, the present, and for eternities to

come. This Law is preserved for posterity in the *Dhammapada*, a sublime ethical treatise of twenty-six cantos, which is to millions of Buddhists what the Bhagavad-Gita is to Hindus. Although it is not known when it was first committed to writing, its content suggests a direct descent from spiritual instruction given by Gautama Buddha. Extensive research confirms that these teachings express a universal wisdom, a rediscovery of the eternal Buddha Dharma which could rightly be termed the Sanatana Dharma or "eternal wisdom."

Dhammapada -- the path of *dhamma* (Sanskrit *dharma*, a word comprising the essential ideas contained in the words truth, virtue, and law) -- was compiled at the First Council of Buddhist Elders three weeks after the Master's passing. It is therefore the oldest anthology on Buddhism extant. The work consists of a systematic collection of stanzas, terse yet elegant, giving the quintessence of Buddhist wisdom. These stanzas were the distillation of various sermons delivered by Buddha to kings and queens, to ministers and merchants, cowherds and peasants, to grieving mothers, distressed lovers, monks, paupers, saints, and criminals. The first verse of the Dhammapada is a direct attack on the dialectical materialism prevalent at the time of Buddha. Mind is not a by-product of physical elements; according to Buddha, mind precedes everything that exists. Nor is the destruction of the physical body the end of human existence. The external cosmos is a creation of mind integrated into a cosmic order of cause and effect.

The Master admonished his leading Arhats not to compel his followers to learn Ardha-Magadhi in order to understand his doctrine. Therefore, when Buddhism expanded, as it rapidly did, beyond the frontiers of Aryavarta, the missionaries began to translate the Dharma into numerous dialects and vernaculars. We know, for example, that *Dharmapadam,* an early Prakrit treatise, was composed during the fourth century B.C., and that about a century later, the first Buddhist king, Asoka, sent his son, Arhat Mahinda, to Sri Lanka, where he and his disciples made the first Sinhalese version of this ethical manual, titled *Dhampiya*. Unfortunately, this earliest rendition of *Dhammapada* in Sinhalese-Prakrit fell into oblivion soon after Buddhist prelates retranslated it into Pali along with the other works of the Tripitaka in 88-76 B.C.E.

It may be noted that Pali, like most European languages, has no alphabet of its own; in Sri Lanka it was written in Sinhalese script, while Burmese Buddhists used their own characters to write the Pali text. The language used by Buddha, Ardha-Magadhi dialect, is very similar to the literary language of the Jains. Pali has the coloring of this dialect. Because in a living language terms undergo continual modification as the thought life of the nation changes, the Theravada scholars tried to retranslate the Buddha Dhamma from Sinhalese back into Pali, which has the Sinhalese idiom unaltered with very little Sanskrit influence upon it. Most of the Indian versions are no longer extant, either in printed or manuscript form, in any of the museum libraries of the world. Only a few birchbark manuscripts in Prakrit were discovered in the early part of the nineteenth century in northwestern India.

A Chinese *Dhammapada*, translated from the Sanskrit, was not lost; it was the first book, along with the rest of the Tripitaka, ever to be produced in a printing press and was made

from wooden blocks in 972 A.D. But not until 1885 was the Pali Dhammapada, which had been lost to India for twenty-two centuries or so, reintroduced into that country in Devanagari transliteration by my paternal uncle, Ven. B. Sri Dharmapala Nayaka Thero of Batapola, under the guidance of Rt. Ven. C. A. Silakkandha Nayaka Thero of Dodanduwa, Sri Lanka.

Buddhism, along with Christianity and Islam, is one of the three major religions in the world. Like Christianity and Islam, it is spread throughout the world but also has a geographical center, Asia, where it predominates. Unlike Christianity and Islam, it has no absolutely fixed canon of scriptural writings—with the exception, of course, of the teachings of **Siddhartha Gautama**, the original Buddha—but rather consists of a veritable mountain of writings and teachings; some Buddhists accept all these writings as "canonical," while others enforce a hierarchy on them, while others reject some or most of these writings and teachings. Growing up in a Christian or Jewish community as we have (even if we happen not to be Christian or Jewish), it is hard for us, as Westerners, to comprehend the size and openness of the Buddhist Scriptures; potentially, anybody who achieves enlightenment could add to the canon of the Buddhist scriptures, an idea that most of us, with our ideas of a final and fixed body of religious "scripture," would find alien.

As daunting as the sheer size and number of Buddhist sects and teachings seem for any student approaching it for the first time might be, all Buddhist sects essentially share one set of writings in common: the teachings of the Buddha. Far and away the most crucial of these writings is The Sermon at Benares, or more standardly, the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutra* ("The Turning of the Wheel of Dharma"); this sermon is in Buddhist religion what "The Sermon on the Mount" is to the Christian religion: both the first teachings and the most central. The text of this sermon is reproduced in your textbook on page 65. The sayings of the Buddha were extracted out of the stories of Buddha's life to form the *Dhammapada*, which means "the path of dharma." This book consists of 423 sayings of the Buddha, grouped into 26 categories. One must take the title of the book with utmost seriousness; the sayings of the Buddha were not meant to be a fixed, static, unchanging doctrine, but rather a path which anyone can follow.

The textbook contains a life of Siddhartha Guatama, the young prince who, out of a sense of infinite compassion for the sufferings of humanity, undertook to free humanity from the endless cycles of birth and rebirth (***samsara***) and the suffering (*duhkha*) incumbent to these cycles. Finding that austerity and absolute asceticism was not the answer, Siddhartha turned to a moderate existence, the "middle way," which formed the basis of meditation into the heart of existence. Meditation released him from all concern for his individual self or ego; at the moment his "self" as a particular, discreet entity faded from existence, he entered into **Nirvana**, which means "extinction" and is the only escape from the sufferings of the world and the cycles of birth and death. At this point, Siddhartha was *buddha*, the "awakened one," for he had awakened from the fleetingness of life into the permanence of the divine. Moved by compassion for his fellow human beings, however, he slipped back into the ordinary run of things in order to teach humans how to attain this state of extinction outside of suffering, death, and decay. He came

down and delivered the his first sermon in the Deer Park in Benares; this speech was the pivotal moment in human history, the point at which the divine came in contact with the human world, and set off "the wheel of dharma (the path)," which continues to turn until the end of time.

Read these selections and "The Turning of the Wheel of Dharma" very carefully. Human beings desire one thing in the thought of the Buddha: pleasure (*sukha*). They find instead "suffering" or "pain" (*duhkha*). The cause of that suffering is selfishness or self-centeredness (*trishna*). If this selfishness and self-centeredness is totally extinguished (*nirvana*), then all suffering and pain cease. To extinguish such selfishness and self-centeredness is, however, a long and difficult process. At the foundation of the Buddha's world view and the process of enlightenment or awakening is the idea of karma, which are all the effects which spin out endlessly from previous causes and previous thoughts in this life and the infinity of lives which preceded. What does this mean? If you do or think anything, there will be a reciprocal effect: reward for virtue, or retribution for sin. This reciprocal effect, if it does not appear in this world, will surely appear in some other existence. All that happens to you, all that you think, all that you do, is in some way a reciprocal effect of what has happened to you in the past, what you thought in the past, or what you did in the past. Hence the near impossibility of getting off this endless round of cause and effect; existence becomes this kind of perpetual motion machine. The most important cause in this universe for the Buddhist is thought.